

The selection of land for nature conservation purposes in New South Wales

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John Whitehouse's review of the intellectual assumptions that have served to "drive" the acquisition programme for the New South Wales' nature conservation reserve systems rightly ascribes to the Scientific Committee on Parks and Reserves a very important role during the period when I was Director (1969-1972). However, it would be wrong to underestimate the Service's own understanding of the need to ensure that the Park and Reserve system included an adequate sample of the plant and animal communities of New South Wales. It had inherited a considerable body of knowledge and research from the Fauna Protection Panel and included among its staff a number of people with ecological qualifications who shared with other scientists an understanding of the basis on which such a system should be established.

Nevertheless there can be little doubt that for practical reasons, the primary goal of the Service's land acquisition programme during those early years was to increase the estate as quickly as possible from the stock of available Crown land. The Minister for Lands of the day, Tom Lewis, was well aware that his successors in office were unlikely to be as committed to the concept of a professional Service managing an extensive suite of Parks and Reserves as he was and was unrelenting in his pressure on the staff of both the Service and the Lands Department to identify and transfer land to the Service where there was no major conflicting interest. He was particularly keen to see significant parcels of land in the Western Division, then coming out of 99 year leasehold tenure, transferred to the Service despite the fierce opposition of many Western Division graziers with whom he had considerable personal rapport.

Of course the Service was always concerned to ensure that the lands acquired had significant nature conservation values, but in those days the total Service estate was so small and unrepresentative that almost any substantial area of land still in a reasonably natural condition was seen as worth acquiring, even if it was clear that it would take some (perhaps many) years of management to return it to a condition with high conservation value. In some cases there were very specific

nature conservation objectives in mind (e.g., the Macquarie Marshes, Pilliga) where particular ecosystems were targeted.

Lewis' enthusiasm was not always shared by other agencies, including some elements of his own Department but despite that, significant increases in the area under Service control were achieved. There were, of course, critics who argued that the Service could not properly manage what it already controlled and should not be encouraged to acquire more. While acknowledging the inadequacy of the Service's management capability, Minister Lewis rejected any suggestion of a moratorium on further acquisition, taking the long-sighted view that we should get the land while it was available (and while he was Minister) — a view which we all shared.

There is no doubt that he was correct. Whitehouse notes "Today there are few remaining large areas of unoccupied Crown lands and the prospects for significant further redistributions of government lands are slim as the utilization patterns for most government held lands have been settled and government programmes are directed at maximizing the disposal of public lands". Curiously, it was Tom Lewis who introduced the "freeholding" legislation in the 1970s, which began the process of privatization of the extensive Crown lease lands.

I have no doubt that Whitehouse's conclusion that "the conservation of ecological diversity can be argued as deserving priority as the driving force for the nature conservation programme" is correct. Whether or not the concept of "community" is as useful in sorting animal species into identifiable groups as it is for plants does not, it seems to me, matter very much. There is now an abundance of evidence to suggest that an adequate programme of conservation of identifiable plant "communities" or "associations" or "ecosystems" (however defined) will ensure the "capture" of most animal species, especially invertebrates and, in particular, insects. To the extent that some animal species require special attention to try to ensure their survival, then their needs can be specifically addressed through the establishment of particular habitat reserves and appropriate management programmes.